

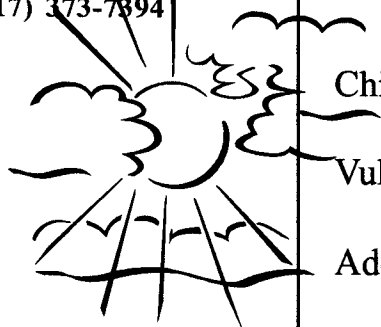
***Department
of
Human
Services***

Articles in Today's Clips

Tuesday, June 13, 2006

(Be sure to maximize your screen to read your clips)

Prepared by the
DHS Office of
Communications
(517) 373-7394



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WAYNE COUNTY

Man who tried to snatch Canton tot from home still at large

June 13, 2006

BY NAOMI R. PATTON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Tips to Canton police about a man who tried to abduct a Canton toddler twice on June 3 have come up short.

Police Sgt. Rick Pomorski said Monday that the toddler's mother has not been able to identify a suspect in photo lineups.

The incidents occurred around noon June 3 in the 800 block of Mystic Court.

Police said the man picked up the 1 1/2-year-old boy, who was playing in his driveway as his mother had a garage sale, and tried to walk off with him.

The boy's mother stopped the man and took her son back.

The man reportedly told the mother: "He's cute. I'll be back."

Police said the man returned about 5 minutes later, walking to the woman's garage. The woman saw the man and took her son inside.

The man walked away and then drove off.

Michigan State Police created a composite sketch of the man.

Police said he is described as a darker-skinned white male, 40 to 50 years old, about 5 feet 4 and 225 pounds.

He was last seen wearing a white shirt, blue shorts, sandals and a gold necklace with a small charm or pendant attached. Police said he drove away in a white sedan.

Pomorski said a different Canton woman said she saw the man driving around her subdivision at Cherry Hill and Beck roads around 2 p.m. June 3.

On June 4, another woman reported seeing the man in a white Plymouth Acclaim sedan driving in her neighborhood.

Anybody with information about the suspect or an attempted abduction is asked to call the Canton Police Department anytime at 734-394-5400.

Contact NAOMI R. PATTON at 313-223-4485 or npatton@freepress.com.

Police seek runaway boy

The Grand Rapids Press

Tuesday, June 13, 2006

EDMORE -- Police are looking for a 10-year-old boy who ran away from home Monday and headed for a fort in the woods. Sergio Nemetz is described as 80 pounds, brown hair and eyes, with a thin build. He was wearing a white T-shirt, blue denims and white shoes. Montcalm County sheriff's deputies have used search dogs to look for the boy, who lives at 404 S. 10th St., Edmore. The boy's grandmother was watching the boy and his siblings while their mother was at an out-of-state funeral. His mother has been notified, as has his father, who is serving in the military.

Plea deal rejected

The Grand Rapids Press

Tuesday, June 13, 2006

GRAND RAPIDS -- A Honduran native accused of killing a 28-year-old woman and her unborn baby turned down a plea deal Monday that offered a chance at parole. If convicted of first-degree murder in the Oct. 14, 2005, strangulation of Silvia Sanchez-Parada, Edwin Lario Munoz, 19, will face a mandatory sentence of life in prison without parole. Prosecutors offered to let Munoz plead guilty to second-degree murder, a life offense that allows parole. The defendant was scheduled to plead Monday. Kent County Circuit Judge Dennis Kolenda set trial for Sept. 6, but emphasized: "When we say no parole in this state, we mean it." Munoz was on the cover of Parade magazine for a story about orphaned immigrant children. Police said Munoz killed the woman, then attacked her husband, Leoncio Garcia-Lopez, when he got home. All lived in the rented home at 848 Baxter St. SE. Munoz underwent psychological testing before he was found competent to stand trial.

Teen Says Man Fondled Her At Restaurant

39-Year-Old Man Faces Charges

POSTED: 1:27 pm EDT June 12, 2006

A 14-year-old girl told police she was fondled by a man at a Ferndale restaurant this weekend.

Brian Suhr (pictured), 39, of Sterling Heights, faces misdemeanor charges of fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct in connection with the incident at Como's Italian Restaurant on Woodward Avenue Friday night, according to a report in *The Royal Oak Mirror - Observer & Eccentric*.

The girl told police that at about 11:15 p.m. she was walking to the restroom with a 15-year-old friend when they crossed paths with Suhr. The girl said the man grabbed her breast, the paper reported.

"The girls were there at that hour because they are relatives of the owner," said Ferndale police Lt. Norm Raymond.

Raymond said no adults witnessed the alleged incident. The girls told an employee, who then called police.

Suhr was taken into custody. He pleaded not guilty during an arraignment on Saturday. A preliminary examination was scheduled for 1 p.m. Thursday.

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METRO DETROIT

Teen accuser in Internet porn case hospitalized

Suspect's attorney says it may affect court hearing Thursday

June 13, 2006

BY JOE SWICKARD
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The criminal case against Kenneth Gourlay -- accused of molesting and luring a young teenager into an Internet child pornography ring -- has hit a potential snag because the star witness and alleged victim is hospitalized.

Gourlay's defense attorney James Howarth said he was told Monday that the hospitalization of Justin Berry was emotionally related but he was not given further details.

Howarth said Gourlay's preliminary examination is set for Thursday and Friday in Ann Arbor District Court, but that he is in the dark about what the hospitalization means for the case.

"I just don't know," Howarth said. "I would want to hear from a psychiatrist what the diagnosis is. It's one thing if he's stressed out by all the attention, but it's something else again if he's paranoid schizophrenic."

Berry's lawyer, Stephen Ryan of Washington, D.C., declined to comment.

Without Berry's testimony, many of the charges will be difficult to sustain.

Berry, now 19, has become the international face of Internet child exploitation, starting last year when he went public in the New York Times with a shocking account of how he was lured into becoming an online sexual performer.

Since those first accounts, Berry has made appearances at a U.S. congressional hearing and on television -- notably with Oprah Winfrey -- describing his experiences in a thriving online market for adults who sexually exploit children.

Berry, from Bakersfield, Calif., eventually became a business partner in a site featuring pornographic videos of him and other young men and boys before becoming a government witness.

Gourlay, 28, is charged in Washtenaw County with molesting Berry in 2001 and with nine other child pornography-related felonies.

Michigan Special Assistant Attorney General Douglas Baker said he cannot comment on Berry or the case.

"I plan to be in court on Thursday," Baker said.

At least 1 1/2 days have been set aside for the hearing to determine if Gourlay will stand trial, with a full day or more dedicated just to Berry's testimony.

Howarth said he will ask that Gourlay's bond be reduced because of Berry's inability to appear in court.

"Mr. Gourlay should not be held hostage while his accuser's emotional problems are sorted out," Howarth said. "He is being held in protective custody, which is the nice way of saying he is in solitary and locked down."

Calling Gourlay, of Detroit a risk to public safety, 14-A District Judge J. Cedric Simpson previously ordered him held under a \$500,000 cash bond.

When Berry does appear, this would be one of the first times he has faced hostile questioning about his journey from naive middle school student to a drug-abusing online pornographic performer and entrepreneur.

"Yes, he's been before Congress, but that was pretty friendly questioning and he was under U.S. Justice Department immunity," Howarth said. Gourlay also was called before the congressional committee but declined to testify.

As described during Berry's appearances and in court records, Gourlay allegedly helped bring Berry -- then 14 -- to a summer computer camp at the University of Michigan, then molested him at his home in Washtenaw County. Gourlay also allegedly helped Berry set up a sexually oriented Web site.

In January, a Virginia man implicated by Berry pleaded guilty in federal court to pornography-related charges. Berry said that the man, Gregory Mitchel, molested him and that they later went into business together running a Web site. Berry left the operation and reported Mitchel to authorities.

Contact JOE SWICKARD at 313-222-8769 or jswickard@freepress

MySpace: More girls flirt with danger

Joel Kurth and Amy Lee / The Detroit News

June 13, 2006

She is an honor student from a small town in Michigan. He calls himself Abdullah Psycho.

They found love on the Internet and it became an international incident -- a spectacular example of what experts say is fast becoming a modern twist to an age-old problem of young girls, older men and bad decisions. Nationwide, Web enticement cases have quadrupled in recent months, according to a national group that tracks such incidents.

Katherine Lester, 16, is in hiding today after creating a global stir by leaving her mother's home last week in the farming town of Gilford, population 833, and boarding a series of planes en route to Israel's West Bank.

She wanted to meet a man with the ominous nickname, believed to be 25, whom she met on the popular Web site MySpace.com. Instead, FBI agents tracked her down Thursday during a layover in Amman, Jordan, and persuaded her to return to her bewildered family.

"Evidently, she's in love with this man. That's what she said," said family attorney Renee Wood, during a press conference Monday on the steps of the Tuscola County Courthouse in Michigan's Thumb.

"She's never been away before. She's a straight-A student, National Honor Society member. She gets along with Mom. She gets along with Dad. There are a lot of questions," Wood said.

FBI agents have plenty, but the anonymous man who calls himself Abdullah Psycho isn't providing them. The self-proclaimed "industrial/trip-hop/electronica" musician's MySpace page features a cartoon with the caption "I Give You My Heart, Kath."

Authorities believe he paid for the plane ticket for the girl who turns 17 next week.

"I'm not what they think," he wrote in an e-mail to The Detroit News before declining further comment.

The incident is the third in a month involving Michigan teenage girls leaving home to find older men they met on MySpace, a site that allows its 72 million users to post photos, swap comments and link up as friends.

In May, Macomb County deputies stopped a 25-year-old Hammond, Ind., man who drove to Harrison Township to meet a 13-year-old girl he met on the site. Earlier this month, a 17-year-old from Wyoming drove to West Branch to pick up a 12-year-old girl.

"It's just taking off on us," said Macomb County Sheriff Mark Hackel, who drove to Jackson to intercept the car with the Indiana man and Macomb County teen.

"We get more complaints from parents than are ever exposed by the media. It's an everyday occurrence, and it's almost impossible to keep track of. Kids know the dangers. They get more intrigued by these sites because of the dangers."

Internet complaints spike

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has seen complaints about Internet child enticement soar in just the past few months -- from an average of 50 per week to 199 last week, said John Shehan, who operates the group's cyber tip line.

"These predators were always there, but they're following kids to these social networking sites, showing up as their new best friend, showering them with compliments and paying them attention," Shehan said.

Shehan said MySpace doesn't appear to have any liability in the case. In fact, he praised the site for adding a link to his group's hot line in the past two months and working with law enforcement on enticement cases.

MySpace officials declined comment beyond a written statement from Hemanshu Nigam, its chief security officer.

"At MySpace, we take seriously our responsibility to provide a safe and well-lit community for all our members," he said. "Every page of our site provides a direct link to safety tips and we offer special safety features for our younger members. The Internet is a powerful tool for connecting people with one another and, at the same time, parents are learning that they must teach their teens how to be safe and smart online."

Much is unclear about the cyber-courtship of Lester and the man who calls himself Abdullah.

She plays volleyball at Akron-Fairgrove High School.

His MySpace account features a photo of him with his hand on his head, as well as his slow, Gothic music and comments from friends and well-wishers such as SCUMBOY.

Most comments are supportive and follow logic similar to that of a poster who calls herself Jessy.

"you guys are my hero it was really cool what she did just for you. the media should mind there own buisnnes i dont think it was a big deal," she wrote on Sunday.

Event puzzles friends, family

Lester's friends and family are more puzzled how the level-headed, sheltered teen could get caught up in such a mess. Neighbors say the family moved about 18 months ago to the tidy two-story yellow house at the end of a dead-end farm road.

"Katherine is a fun-loving, upbeat person. She is always the one who finds the silver lining in a bad situation, and no one can believe that she would do something like this voluntarily," said Kara Trisch, a classmate.

Both Lester's mother, Shawn, and sister, Mary, appeared with Wood at Monday's press conference. At one point, Shawn Lester began to cry, but neither spoke to the media.

The 16-year-old somehow persuaded her parents to get her a passport, saying she needed it for a trip to Canada. Instead, she left home in a taxi June 4 and called every day to tell her mother, "I love you and I'll be home tomorrow," Wood said. Later, it was revealed she stayed in hotels in Bay City and New York.

By Wednesday, Shawn Lester -- a stay-at-home mother who is divorced from Katherine's father, William Terry Lester -- phoned authorities and reported her daughter missing.

Family is traumatized

Wood acknowledged that Katherine Lester is doing well and appeared "jovial" upon her return to the United States, but said Shawn Lester hasn't been alone with her daughter since her return.

"The family (is) so traumatized that it's hard for them to speak about it," Wood said. "Shawn loves her very much, but she cannot support her actions. She doesn't know why this happened."

She said the incident has prompted Shawn Lester to start counseling; her daughter and ex-husband could soon follow.

Tuscola County Sheriff Thomas Kern said he has more questions than answers about the episode. "In this post 9-11 world, how does a 16-year-old travel to another country?" he said.

"These kids do not realize the inherent danger of going to another country," he added. "Her parents do and I do, but these are kids."

Wood wouldn't reveal where Katherine Lester is staying, except to say she's "home and by home, I mean the U.S." She said the family has been "bombarded" with phone calls by reporters and implored the media to leave them alone.

Detroit News Staff Writer Marisa Schultz contributed to this report. You can reach Joel Kurth at (313) 222-2610 or jkurth@detnews.com.

Web danger signs

- ☐ A child receives mail, gifts or packages from someone parents don't know.
- ☐ A practice of turning the computer monitor off or quickly changing the screen on the monitor when parents enter the room.
- ☐ A child who receives phone calls from men parents don't know or is making calls, sometimes long distance, to numbers parents don't recognize.

What parents can do

- ☐ Use the caller ID service to determine who is calling your child.
- ☐ Monitor your child's access to all types of live electronic communications (i.e., chat rooms, instant messages, Internet Relay Chat, etc.), and monitor your child's e-mail.

How to instruct your kids

- ☐ Teach them to never arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone they met online.
- ☐ Tell them to never upload pictures of themselves.
- ☐ Instruct them to never give out identifying information.

MICHIGAN

Teen made 2 stops on her way to Jordan

Lawyer says girl lied to her mom to meet an online pal

June 13, 2006

BY FRANK WITSIL
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

CARO -- The Tuscola County teen who made her way from her tiny home in Gilford Township to Amman, Jordan, last week first stopped in Bay City, then New York on her way to see a man she met on MySpace.com.

With the Tuscola County Courthouse as a backdrop Monday, Renee Wood, an attorney for Katherine Lester's mother, Shawn Lester, said the teen is now staying with her father in an undisclosed location to escape media attention. Joining Wood at the courthouse were Shawn Lester and her other daughter, Mary. Neither spoke to members of the news media.

Wood said that Katherine, who turns 17 next week, met a man whose MySpace.com account described him as a 25-year-old from Jericho named Abdullah Psycho. The teen then tricked her mother into getting her a passport by saying she was going to Canada with friends, and left home last Monday. She said the girl left home to meet the man because she thought she was in love.

Wood said that along Katherine's journey she called her mother every day, assuring her she was OK.

The teen stayed at a hotel in Bay City, then in a hotel in New York City before flying to the Middle East, Wood said. She was found after federal authorities were alerted at the airport in Amman, Jordan. Every day for three days beginning June 5, Katherine called her mom.

She said: "Hi mom. I love you. I'm fine. Don't worry about me. I'll be home tomorrow," Wood said.

By the third day, Wood said, Shawn Lester contacted local authorities, who alerted the FBI.

The girl's stepmother then found Katherine's page on MySpace.com and discovered the girl had been swapping messages with a man who said he was from Jericho.

Initially, Wood said, the teen did not want to return to Gilford Township, a small rural community of 800 people. Katherine appears to have logged on to her MySpace.com account as recently as Sunday, according to the Web page, which tracks when it was most recently accessed.

Wood said she and Katherine's family still do not know how old the man is -- whether he is 25 as he claimed on the Internet or 20 as he told a reporter from WNEM-TV in Saginaw on Saturday. Wood said she could not discuss rumors that Katherine met with the man's family in Michigan before she left to see him.

Wood also said she did not know how the teen got from her home in Gilford Township to New York or how she paid the hotel bills. Tuscola County Sheriff Thomas Kern said Katherine left her house in a taxi.

Lester returned to the United States late Friday, with television footage showing her waving as she walked across a tarmac at Bishop International Airport in Flint.

The teen had been working as an intern with a Caro radio station for at least the past three months. Jon Sicotte, a sports director at WIDL-FM/WKOY-AM radio, said Monday that there had been suspicion that Katherine was accessing her MySpace account while at work. Her older sister Mary Lester also works at the station, Sicotte said.

Sicotte said that everyone at the station has a MySpace account.

Station General Manager Jamie McCoy could not be reached for comment.

The FBI declined to comment on whether the teen had used the work computer.

MySpace.com is a social networking site owned by News Corp. that claims about 70 million members, and is popular among teenagers and young adults. People of all ages use the site to post photos, blogs and profiles, often to connect with others.

Wood said Katherine is expected to be interviewed by the FBI this week, but could not discuss whether any charges would be filed against the man the teen tried to meet.

Terry Booth, a spokesman for the FBI in Detroit, said that the agency is investigating with authorities in Jordan and Israel.

Wood said that she hopes that the teen realizes the gravity of her situation.

Kern said that he does, too, adding, "Our biggest problem is that kids do not realize the inherent dangers of doing something like this."

Contact FRANK WITSIL at 248-351-3690 or fwitsil@freepress.com.

Family besieged

Tuesday, June 13, 2006

LaNIA COLEMAN
THE SAGINAW NEWS

CARO -- With the safe return of a Tuscola County teen who flew to the Middle East to contact a man she met on the Internet, Sheriff Thomas T. Kern was entertaining ideas about how to pre-empt similar episodes involving other youths.

"I don't think these young people realize what can happen when they go into some of these Middle Eastern countries," Kern said. "In some areas, women are treated as slaves. It's very, very dangerous."

Katherine R. Lester left her mother's Gilford home in a taxi Monday. After an overnight stop in Bay City, the 16-year-old Akron-Fairgrove High School student made her way to JFK International Airport in New York, where she eventually boarded an airplane bound for Amman, Jordan, and then Tel Aviv, Israel.

Lester returned to the U.S. on Friday and remains in hiding to avoid the media attention her overseas exploits attracted, said Renee J. Wood, a Caro attorney representing the teen's mother, Shawn Lester.

Kern and Wood teamed up for a news conference Monday at the Tuscola County Courthouse. Shawn Lester and her 19-year-old daughter, Mary, also attended.

"We understand that people are eager to understand what happened," Wood said.

Now that the teen has returned, however, the family wants the media and the public to leave them alone, Wood said.

"We appreciate the inquiries into Katherine's well-being," she said. "The media response was crucial to this family. But the family is being bombarded. The neighbors, friends and kids at school are being bombarded. We ask that everyone give the family some time to be alone."

Since arriving at Bishop International Airport in Flint, Shawn and Katherine Lester have had only two short face-to-face visits, Wood said. The first occurred amid tight security at the airport.

Wood said she would not comment, because of the ongoing FBI investigation, about the man Katherine Lester intended to meet in Israel.

Katherine Lester is to meet with FBI agents to answer questions later this week, Wood said.

Meanwhile, Kern and other law enforcement leaders are left with questions of their own, such as how to prevent things like this from happening.

Kern said an international agency is needed to tackle the criminal activity running rampant on the Internet.

"It's time for law enforcement to get tough on this Internet thing," Kern said. "The crime rate has skyrocketed since the inception of the Internet. We have identity theft, sex crimes, kidnapping ... and it's all happening because people have access to everyone else in the world and their private information."

Local law enforcement agencies have a tough time investigating crimes that occur in cyberspace, particularly when the perpetrators live outside the United States where American police have no jurisdictional clout, Kern said.

"In this (Lester) case, the authorities in Jordan almost didn't send her back because she hadn't broken any laws there," he said. "It wasn't until they found out she was a minor traveling outside the country without permission that they pulled her passport and sent her home."

Kern also proposed more awareness and school outreach aimed at warning children and teens about the dangers of Internet use.

LaNia Coleman covers law enforcement for The Saginaw News. You may reach her at 776-9690.

OAKLAND COUNTY

School out at Children's Village

Panel rejects contract with Waterford

June 13, 2006

BY KATHLEEN GRAY
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A school for abused, neglected and criminally charged youth at Children's Village will basically shut down after action taken Monday by a committee of the Oakland County Board of Commissioners.

The Waterford school district has educated children at the facility for more than 20 years under a contract with Oakland County, which owns and runs Children's Village.

But four Democratic commissioners on the General Government Committee -- Tim Melton of Auburn Hills, David Coulter of Ferndale, Vincent Gregory of Southfield and Mattie McKinney Hatchett of Pontiac -- were joined by Republican Commissioner Christine Long of Commerce Township in rejecting a three-year contract extension.

The contract expires July 1, so summer school at Children's Village will be canceled. The fate of next school year, which would begin in September, is up in the air until the full Board of Commissioners takes action.

About 1,200 kids go to school at Children's Village each year, but the daily count falls between 200 and 240 students. Waterford will be responsible for educating the general education students at the facility.

But 54% of the children are classified as special education students and might have to be transported by the county to their home school districts. If the students are criminally charged, the courts may order tutors to come in, at county taxpayer expense, to educate the students at Children's Village.

"A condition of the Children's Village license is there has to be an educational system there," Deputy County Executive Gerald Poisson said. "But what commissioners have said today is that these kids who have been removed from their homes aren't worth the same type of investment that we make into our adult prisoners."

Though the state picks up the bulk of the cost to run the Children's Village school at an expense of \$2.1 million, the contract called for the county to subsidize it for \$489,000 a year.

The county's share was cut by more than \$100,000 a year over the course of the last three-year contract. Commissioners had asked the administration last week to bring back the contract with more cuts.

"It's our recommendation to approve the contract as we presented," Poisson said. "It's a fair deal between the school district and the county. We recognize the board's right to delete things, but we do not recommend that."

The board could have cut driver's education and summer school, which would have saved \$67,000, but it chose to reject the contract outright instead.

"You've obviously drawn the line in the sand and you're not going to negotiate," Hatchett said. "To paint a picture that this is the last chance for these poor pitiful kids isn't an accurate picture."

Commissioners approving the contract were: Republicans William Patterson of Oxford, Eileen Kowall of White Lake Township, Hugh Crawford of Novi, Eric Wilson of Lake Orion and Will Molnar of Troy.

Contact KATHLEEN GRAY at 313-223-4407 or gray@freepress.com.

Man Charged With Allegedly Abusing Elderly Mother

Man Allegedly Threw Woman's Walker Far From Her

POSTED: 10:32 am EDT June 13, 2006

A local man is charged for allegedly abusing his elderly mother and then forcing her to crawl to safety.

Bobbie Matney, 63, of Eastpointe, got into an argument with his 84-year-old mother over money spent on cigarettes, according to the Macomb Daily.

When the argument got heated, police said Matney threw his mother's walker far from her.

The woman sustained injuries to her arm and thigh during the scuffle, but refused medical attention, according to police.

Neighbors told police the argument began in the back yard, and they saw the woman crawling around the home to the driveway, according to the paper's reports.

Matney was charged with vulnerable adult abuse.

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Tuesday, June 13, 2006

A child is waiting

Personable, athletic teen hopes for an understanding family

Rosemary Dorr / Special to The Detroit News

The outgoing teen shares with a smile: "I'm Thaddeus, but I like to be called 'T.' I've got a great sense of humor. I'm flexible. I'm athletic. My favorite things to do are to talk on the phone, hang out with friends and watch 'Scooby Doo.' I'm a good kid to have around."

"He's a typical 13-year-old," says his foster father of six months. "He's basically friendly and energetic. He likes all sports."

Thaddeus adds, "I know how to play just about everything. Golf, swimming, cricket, wrestling, basketball and football. I do track. I do hurdles."

He also plays the drums, enjoys rapping and sings in his church choir.

"I like school," says the seventh-grader in special education classes who also receives tutoring. "He tries as much as he can," notes his foster father.

Thaddeus wants friends "to be cool. No liars. Don't be a follower, be a leader." He'd like a family "to be nice and understand what I'm talking about and listen to me when I need to talk to somebody."

His adoption worker hopes to find Thaddeus a family "that can provide support and structure with realistic guidelines he can respect."

Might you consider adoption? Please talk with Jennifer VanderMark at Orchards Children's Services (248) 593-2181.

Last column's child: Parshey, 13, is a "sweet girl" who likes to play basketball and be helpful, enjoys one-on-one attention and needs help with academics. For information, call Lauren Reed at Evergreen Children's Services, (313) 862-1000, ext. 160.

A child is waiting appears Tuesdays in Features.

OAKLAND COUNTY

Making a difference

Mentors inspire wayward teens in Pontiac to change for the better

June 13, 2006

BY L.L. BRASIER
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

There was a time when Lonnell, Isiah, Richard, and Devontea, Pontiac eighth-graders, would have spent the afternoon playing video games or hanging on the corner after school.

That is, if they even made it to school.

Mostly struggling students with spotty attendance records -- some with bad attitudes and little family support -- are those teachers and administrators worry about most.

But on Thursday, 20 boys from Lincoln Middle School made their way through the Oak Hill Cemetery in Pontiac, picking up trash, raking leaves and tidying up.

"I'm thinking that when I go past this place and see that it looks good, I'm going to feel good about it," Lonnell Joyner said, holding a trash bag full of bottles, paper plates and rusty cans.

Lonnell, 14, and his fellow workers are part of a mentoring program at three Pontiac middle schools that is sponsored by the Pontiac Alumni Foundation and the Daimler Chrysler Foundation. For the past eight weeks, 90 kids have been meeting weekly with about 12 adult mentors during school.

Unlike mentoring programs designed to provide children with outings to places they might not otherwise experience, this one teaches young people that they are an important asset in the community and that they can make changes.

"I have been most impressed with what these kids have been willing to do," said Michael Lavoie, a mentor at Lincoln. Lavoie, an attorney and senior partner with Detroit-based law firm Butzel Long, met with students for an hour every Wednesday for two months.

"You hear about people who mentor and provide entertainment," he said. "We thought we'd see what would happen if we said to them, 'Let's answer the call and make a difference in the world.' "

Lavoie, 53, who was born and grew up in Pontiac, structured his mentoring around three themes: civic duty, learning and goal setting. His boys studied history and began calling themselves the Gettysburg group because of their interest in the Civil War and the Gettysburg Address, with its call to action. They also studied modern-day Africa, with each youth taking an African nation to research and report on. And they spent much time talking about how to set reasonable goals, maintain self-discipline and develop strategies for dealing with the disappointments in life.

Then some amazing things started to happen at Lincoln, and at Washington and Madison middle schools, where similar mentoring was taking place.

The teens, mostly boys, began attending class more regularly, improving their overall attendance rate from 58% to 76%, and their grades got better, too. Lincoln's average grade point average for the boys in the program climbed from 1.94 to 2.47, according to a report by the foundation.

"I want to learn as much as I can," said Isiah Mabin, 15, as he carried his trash bag through the cemetery. "I'm going to go to college and become a computer engineer, so I've got to study."

Their teachers began to notice a change as well. "These boys needed a strong male role model," said Lincoln principal Gloria Hill.

"They have plenty of women in their lives -- their mothers, their grandmothers, most of their teachers. They needed someone to help them learn what it is to be a man, and Mike Lavoie is doing that.

"You see a difference, even in the hallway. They used to want to just hang out. Now they're back in class on time."

Irv Speaks, a retired football coach from Pontiac Central High School, has been a mentor for two years. He said the transition from eighth to ninth grade is crucial for kids and that it is important that they get the help they need.

"We just need to show them the way," he said.

The alumni foundation and DaimlerChrysler have been mentoring in the Pontiac schools for almost two years, but mostly with smaller groups. Oakland County Circuit Judge Fred Mester, who founded the foundation to fight illiteracy and high drop-out rates, said he hopes to continue next year with more mentors.

"Everybody wants to feel needed," Lavoie said. "I like to think that's what I taught them. That we need them if we're going to make a better world."

Contact L.L. BRASIER at 248-858-2262 or brasier@freepress.com.

HOW TO BE A MENTOR

- For information on mentoring in Pontiac schools, call the Pontiac Alumni Foundation at 313-225-7060.

Kids told not to be shy as meal program kicks off

Tuesday, June 13, 2006

By Matt Vande Bunte
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- A single-file line stretched about 25 deep behind a table filled with food Monday in Garfield Park. The first few children paused, their hands poised, and looked up inquiringly at Nissa Broden.

"Don't be shy," she urged them. "Y'all can take everything if y'all want."

It will be that way the next two months at several area sites taking part in a federally funded nutrition initiative. Monday was the first day for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's annual Summer Food Service Program, which reimburses faith-based and community organizations for serving free meals to low-income children.

There are 27 sites sponsored by Grand Rapids Public Schools this year, and many other locations in areas where at least 50 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year.

While more than 433,000 students ate discounted school meals in 2005, only 50,598 children ate free lunches during the summer.

The USDA last year reimbursed Michigan sponsors \$4.2 million for feeding about 1.8 million meals to a daily average of 39,175 children. Nationally, more than 115 million meals were served at more than 30,000 locations.

The program ensures low-income children eat at least one healthy meal per day in the summer, said Lawrence Rudmann, USDA spokesman.

"Some kids, during the school year, that's the best meal they have all day," he said. "The (summer) program is still greatly underutilized."

At Garfield Park, the lunch line quickly sped up as the children's shyness disappeared. By the time Dominique Sims took his turn, he boldly picked through the tubs filled with milk, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, trail mix, fruit cups and apple slices.

"The PB&J was nasty," the 11-year-old Alger Middle School student said, adding he still plans to come back each day "so that I have something to do this summer."

At many free-lunch locations in Grand Rapids, children 6 and older can participate in recreational activities funded by the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

The program runs from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. through Aug. 4 at most sites.

"It's something for the kids to do, keep them off the streets," said Broden, site manager at Garfield Park.

Food provider feud could limit school lunch choices

Tuesday, June 13, 2006

By Judy Putnam
Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- A bitter feud over who gets to deliver federal surplus food to more than 200 Michigan school districts threatens to spoil a growing and popular food co-op system, food service directors around the state say.

But the attorney for the owner of an Elmira-based trucking company says it's a case of a small family business v. the Goliath of state government, with state officials allowing big companies to sidestep the bidding process and ruin his client's business. That company, Northern Food Service, is suing the state for unspecified damages for breach of contract.

The lawsuit has put districts in limbo over next year's school lunch program, with March food ordering deadlines for the National School Lunch Program come and gone.

"It's just an absolute mess. It's just an absolute nightmare," said Kathryn Petersen, executive director of the Manistee-based School Purchasing and Resource Consortium (SPARC), which covers 137 districts this year, about 100 of them affected by the lawsuit.

Ultimately school menu choices could be affected, making popular items such as popcorn chicken too expensive, schools argue.

Brant Russell, food service director for Jackson Public Schools, which has been part of co-op for three years, said school districts may have to spend more, and get their food warehouses and freezers up and running again to go back to the old system of food delivery.

School districts in Hanover-Horton, Jackson, Leslie, Napoleon, Northwest and Onsted are part of the food co-op.

Concord, Grass Lake, Homer, Jonesville, Michigan Center and North Adams-Jerome school districts and Paragon Charter Academy plan to join Great Lakes Cooperative next year. Hillsdale Community Schools are part of SPARC.

SPARC and Great Lakes Cooperative, a Traverse City-based group with 146 districts, and all but 30 affected by the lawsuit, have grown dramatically since the 2001-02 school year, when Great Lakes started with 15 districts.

There were more than 200 districts in two co-ops affected by the legal battle this year. Districts planning to join the co-ops next year will push it to 300 districts in delivery areas affected by the lawsuit.

The two co-ops handle about \$11 million worth of food.

Another contract covers the region encompassing Huron, Lapeer, Macomb, Oakland, Sanilac, St. Clair, Tuscola and Wayne counties and isn't affect by the lawsuit.

The co-ops order food from the USDA for the districts and have it delivered through commercial vendors, Gordon Food Service and SYSCO.

Food service directors say they have accounts with the vendors and call for next-day delivery to the individual schools.

The older system, coordinated by the Michigan Department of Education, used Northern Food Service to deliver food. But the food was delivered only twice a month to a central location, meaning schools had to warehouse it.

The selection was chosen by a state committee. Districts would get their "fair share" of whatever commodity was chosen.

Under the food co-op system, there's more flexibility to pick more chicken over beef, for example, or popcorn chicken v. nuggets, food directors say.

Jonathan Raven, the attorney for Northern Food Service, said the family-owned company has worked with the state for 50 years to deliver government food.

He said Northern could deliver on a different schedule to accommodate schools, but it's following its contract with the state as the state requested.

Raven said Northern invested \$2.5 million to expand the company in order to win a bid to service much of the state through the USDA-commodities program, coordinated by the Michigan Department of Education.

When the five-year contract was issued for 2002-03, Northern was told that up to 15 districts were bypassing the state contract to order directly from the federal program, but that any expansion of the co-ops would only come after an independent evaluation.

Raven said that evaluation was not completed and education officials allowed the food co-op to grow, cutting Northern Food Service's business by more than 40 percent.

-- Staff Writer Chad Livengood contributed to this report.

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Great job on jobs

By Alicia Holmes - aholmes@dailypress.net

ESCANABA — The central Upper Peninsula is leading the state when it comes to matching unemployed residents with available jobs.

Since 2005 the local Michigan Works! offices have been participating in the Michigan Opportunity Partnership (MIOP) program, which aims to place unemployed workers. The central U.P. consistently has had the highest placement rate in the state — currently 97 percent, said Vern Westendorf, local Michigan Works! services director.

Central U.P. employers have "pledged" 4,033 job openings — which they register with Michigan Works!, explained Westendorf. Michigan Works! officials then match residents seeking employment with these available jobs. As of last week, 97 percent of these pledged vacancies had been filled, he said.

MIOP was initiated by Gov. Jennifer Granholm.

"We had all these vacancies — 90,000 vacancies — yet unemployment was increasing," said Matt Johnson, director of the governor's U.P. office in Marquette. "We wanted to do a better job matching people with jobs. In some cases this means helping people develop the skills they need."

The central U.P. region encompasses six counties — Delta, Schoolcraft, Menominee, Marquette, Alger and Dickinson, said Johnson.

"Our region stepped up to this challenge," said Gwen Wood, Michigan Works! central U.P. chief operating officer.

The central U.P. shares the state's No. 1 ranking with the three-county Benton Harbor region — which includes Berrien, Van Buren, and Cass counties. Since percentages are tallied often, at any given time one or the other could be No. 1, explained Johnson.

"It's nice to see success," Johnson added. "After you run the numbers and look at the data, these programs are actually working. It gives you a drive to continue ... to give unemployed residents access and opportunity."

Each local Michigan Works! agency contributes to regional success, said Johnson.

"This reflects their ability to connect with those who use their services," he said.

Before MIOP was launched, central U.P. Michigan Works! officials already had built a

foundation that would help them succeed, said Holly Peoples, central U.P. Michigan Works! director of strategic projects.

"We were well positioned," she said.

Michigan Works! had been doing "business outreach" since 2000, meeting with businesses, including manufacturers and health care providers, to develop good relationships, said Peoples.

"Businesses were aware of us ... so when (MIOP) started, we were able to take the program to our existing customers," she said. "Our board is very focused on strategic planning. We think it's important to know what businesses' needs are. If we don't learn about businesses, how can we help people who are looking for work?"

Regional totals also are influenced by each area's unique economy, employee skill levels and unemployment rates, Johnson said. For instance, in the central U.P., manufacturing jobs have experienced a 3 percent growth rate, while downstate jobs in this sector have experienced losses, said Peoples.

"It's a different economy," she said.

Michigan Works! does pre-employment assessments which test skills such as typing speed, she said. If an employer needs someone who types 54 words per minute, Michigan Works! can find a qualified candidate, she explained.

For job seekers, Michigan Works! makes the job search easier and more streamlined, and offers job-search training, said Peoples.

"If someone hasn't been on an interview in five years, they can brush up on those skills," she said.

All residents who come to Michigan Works! offices seeking employment automatically take part in the MIOP program, said Wood. The program also aims to provide accelerated training for jobs in health care and the skilled trades.

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Michigan Works opens Buchanan office

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BUCHANAN - Employers and jobseekers in South Berrien County have access once again to a nearby Michigan Works! Service Center.

Michigan Works! had temporarily closed its former office in Niles in order to find a new and improved facility. It re-opened Thursday, June 8 in Buchanan at 400 E. Front St. Suite B, Buchanan, 1-800-533-5800.

“Many of the businesses we serve are located in South Berrien County and we are committed to helping them strengthen their workforce.” said Todd Gustafson, Executive Director of Michigan Works!

The Center is conveniently located near US 12 and the US 31 bypass. Michigan Works! Berrien-Cass-Van Buren provides employment services to businesses and jobseekers through Service Centers in Benton Harbor, Dowagiac, Paw Paw, and now in Buchanan.